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Taking time to pause: engaging with a gift of reflective practice

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Abstract

This paper is a call to action to engage readers in cultivating reflective practice. The demands of a rapidly changing global society, the influences on emerging learning and teaching landscapes, and the ubiquity of information in 21st century society are catalysts for this focus on reflection. The author conducted a literature review, integrated with personal experience, resulting in a proposed PARA model (pausing, attending, revising, adopting, adapting) as an extension to existing reflective practice models. In the context of this paper, reflective practice is addressed in terms of professional development within higher education (HE) and the personal experience of its transformational potential. This model offers an opportunity for educators to take time to experience reflection beginning with a pause. Although not an instant solution, this act of pausing can kick-start and cultivate reflective practice for novices or lapsed practitioners.

Keywords: Reflective practice; reflection; call to action; pause; educators; personal development.

Introduction

Reflective practice has a pivotal role to play in professional practice (Edwards, 1999) yet can be neglected by practitioners and their organisations. Reflective practice is a discipline which facilitates continuous learning by reflecting on one's actions and the impact of the broader environment. It allows us to see the world 'as it is' not 'as we are conditioned to see it' by our perceptions and paradigms (Covey, 1994, p. 28). In this paper, I propose the PARA model – the processes of pausing, attending, revising, adopting, adapting - as an opportunity to cultivate self-awareness, as an educator, through engaging with reflective practice.

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The nature of this paper is reflective and aims to engage readers in a call to action to explore the proposed model as a framework for reflective practice. This engagement is intended to stimulate a critical discussion on reflective practice, as an active process, to mindfully and effectively negotiate emerging landscapes, to reach a heightened level of self-awareness and enrich professional learning and teaching practice. In this paper, I argue that reflective practice enables educators to flourish and demonstrate agility within a rapidly changing global society. Being a reflective practitioner educator encourages thinking about professional knowledge, changing landscapes and the practice of educating learners. As Marcel Proust writes 'the only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes' (Proust, 1923, cited in Holbeche, 2015, p. 265). Engaging with the PARA model, as a reflective process, is a means to see things differently and see different things.

Research approach

The research approach involved a literature review and desk study, integrated with personal experience resulting in the contribution of a model for kick-starting and enhancing reflective practice amongst professionals, with a particular focus on HE practitioners. This involved exploring literature familiar to the author from the discipline of leadership development, reviewing relevant literature which formed part of my MA (Higher Education) modules and using these bibliographies to identify further relevant reading. The final ingredient in the research approach is the author's personal experience of reflection which has informed the PARA model design.

Literature review

Importance of reflective practice

Integrating theory and practice are central tenets in the development of reflective practice with key contributors being Argyris (1991), Schön (1991), and Dewey (1991). In recent years reflective practice has experienced a growth spurt in education and training where it 'should be seen as a foundation for all professional practice' (Thompson & Thompson, 2008, p. ix) and a technology for personal learning. Reflective practice cultivates a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) where we willingly move out of our comfort zone, rather than 'unmindfully ratify the existing drift of our community's favoured forms' (Kegan & Lahey, 2003, p. 8).

As a professional development and change strategy, Osterman & Kottkamp (2004) argue that reflective practice is relevant for any organization and in any walk of life (p. 1). Individual exploration of taken-for-granted assumptions and unconscious biases have the potential to facilitate meaningful individual, organisational and educational change. Brookfield (cited in Miller, 2010) advocates several outcomes from consistent commitment to critical reflection within higher education: 'inspirational self-assuredness, the regular achievement of teaching goals, and motivated, critically reflective students' (p. 1). Raelin (2002) defines reflective practice as 'periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment' (p. 66). It requires an awareness and openness to change and transition which 'opens up for public scrutiny our interpretations and evaluations of our plans and actions' (p. 67). Reflective practice allows us see things differently, think differently, feel differently, behave differently and ultimately experience life through another lens. Hedberg (2009) contends the results are a 'deeper learning not only about the subject studied but also about the learner' (2009, p. 10). It allows us practice paying attention, on purpose, non-judgementally, in the present moment, which can result in significant transformation. Gaffney (2012) describes this as 'having a sensitivity to what is going on inside yourself; to being on the same emotional wavelength as other people and accurately sensing how things are unfolding around you' (p. 8).

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Despite the growth of interest in reflective practice (Edwards, 1999), it can be neglected (Hedberg, 2009) by individual practitioners and their organisations or institutions. 'Being 'always on' doesn't give workers time to reflect on what they did well and what they did wrong' (Gino & Staats, 2015, p. 114). However, it has been found that when individuals experience the power of reflective practice they become advocates and practitioners (Thompson & Thompson, 2008). The capability to reflect is fundamental for professionals, educators and learners, thus central to effective learning and improves the quality of teaching and learning (Ghaye, 2011). 'Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over & evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning' (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, p. 43). Wheeler (2015) opines that flexibility, agility and the ability to adapt to constant change, which are cultivated through reflective practice, are the ingredients for the most innovative teachers. The most effective teachers, Wheeler (2015) contends, are those who reflect on, in and through their practice, which facilitates a better understanding of how and what can be improved. As a consequence, this paper offers a PARA framework for readers to explore and engage with reflective practice, beginning with a pause.

A changing landscape

Globalisation influences are demanding greater performance and productivity from higher education. Global integration has transformed both the corporate business model and the nature of work (Palmisano, 2015) in the early part of this century. Now, with change unfolding at an extraordinary speed, this transformative period is demanding leaders to reassess and change the game in order to survive and achieve long-term competitive advantage (Palmisano, 2015). This change is impacting across diverse aspects and disciplines of society. Kabat-Zinn (1994) argues that it is possible to learn to surf, as these waves of change will continue, by engaging in reflective practice.

Schön recognises ‘the limitations of technical expertise’ (1991, p. 45) concurring with the views of Schein, Glazer and Simon (as cited in Schön, 1991) who ‘identified a gap between professional knowledge and the demands of real-world practice’ (1991, p. 45). Reflective practice is an opportunity for professionals to bridge this gap and consider the impact of the changing game. In the past decade the proliferation of changes within the educational landscape has brought many opportunities for educators and learners to enhance their learning - MOOCs (massive open on-line learning courses), OERs (open educational resources), modularisation, app technology, social media, to name but some. The wheels of change in society are turning rapidly, many are being forced to reassess their strategy and underlying assumptions (Dobbs, Manyika, & Woetzel, 2015), yet keeping up with the impact of these changes on organisations and institutions is another subject matter – the speed of these wheels of change in organisations and institutions can vary greatly. Global drivers of change impacting on the HE landscape include technology and digitisation, cultural diversity, generational diversity and massification of education with ‘widening access and participation’ (Hazelkorn, Gibson, & Harkin, 2015, p. 237).

According to a report to the European Commission on *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s higher education institutions* (2013), ‘our higher education system is a key building block of our democratic societies... The citizens of Europe have a considerable collective vested interest in the quality of our higher education systems..... A good teacher, like a good graduate, is also an active learner, questioner and critical thinker’ (p. 13). Globalisation has transformed higher education ‘from a local concern into one of geopolitical significance’ (Hazelkorn, Gibson & Harkin, 2015, p. 237). Given the fundamental role of Irish higher education ‘as a beacon for mobile capital and talent’ (Hazelkorn et al., 2015, p. 237) and the engine of economic growth (Hazelkorn et al., 2015),

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it is incumbent on educators to be aware of and respond to changes in society impacting on the higher education ecosystem.

Living in a knowledge economy, with competition for talent and consolidation of institutions, is creating differing needs of the HE sector, both globally and nationally. A new pedagogy is emerging as ‘changes in society, student expectations, and technology are motivating innovative university and college faculty and instructors to re-think pedagogy and teaching methods’ (Teachonline.ca, n.d.). Robinson (2010) challenges the current system in terms of the mismatch with the needs of the twenty first century economy arguing that it was designed and conceived for a different age. Stead (2011) contends the learning is following the learner, the teacher is becoming a facilitator and a collaborator, educators are using technology to create and make, educators must keep improving and allow the learners to help (Stead, 2011). Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2014) focus on the necessary shift in teaching strategy from transmissive lectures to interactive exploratory workshops, stating that ‘the challenge across the sector is to enable teachers to develop teacher-centred facilitation aspects of their pedagogy’ (p. 426). Schön (1991) concurs that ‘professionals are called upon to perform tasks for which they have not been educated’ (p. 14) while Brooks (cited in Schön, 1991, p. 15) ‘argues that professions are now confronted with an unprecedented (sic) requirement for adaptability’. Given these forces of change, Palmisano (2015) argues ‘it is incumbent upon CEOs and business leaders to pursue opportunities, and manage their enterprise, using new and more nuanced approaches’ (p. 69). Professionals, as leaders in their field, may require new skills, opening their minds to new approaches, learning new techniques, stepping outside their comfort zones (Holbeche, 2015) to be effective facilitators in this connected (Ibarra & Hansen, 2011) world. A significant contribution an educator can make to negotiating these forces of change is engagement with reflective practice, being a reflective transformative practitioner and cultivating a triad of awareness (Goleman, 2013) through ‘an inward focus, a focus on others, and an outward focus’ (p. 52).

Models of reflective practice

There are many models which can be adopted in order to engage in reflective practice. To become a critically reflective teacher, Brookfield (1995) advocates four lenses which excellent teachers consistently explore: self-reflection, looking through student eyes, listening to peers as critical friends and researching scholarly literature. These lenses can reveal unconscious biases, ‘implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act’ (Brookfield, 1995, p. 2), but when challenged and changed, ‘the consequences for our lives are explosive’

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(Brookfield, 1995, p. 3). Ghaye (2011) presents ten reflective questions offering an illustration of the breadth of reflective practice. The power of questions cannot be underestimated which forces a 'thinking about our thinking' (Raelin, 2002, p. 66). Asking pivotal questions (Schoemaker & Krupp, 2015) can help broaden the perspective of reflection and inquiry, thus enriching the outcomes for the reflective practitioner.

- (1) Values: How should I act?
- (2) Expectations: What ought I to do?
- (3) Context: What is actually possible here?
- (4) Decisions: Is my action justifiable?
- (5) Options: Could I have done anything better or differently?
- (6) Judgement: How far was this successful?
- (7) Strength: What is worth amplifying (getting more of, not less of) next time?
- (8) Learning: Who has learnt what?
- (9) Voice: Whose voice has been heard and whose has not?
- (10) Knowledge: Whose knowledge is worth knowing and why? (Ghaye, 2011, p. 3)

These questions, while reflective in nature, demand much understanding and time to reap the benefits. Engaging in meaningful reflection allows the practitioner to draw conclusions from their deliberations which can inform changes to future instructions (Lupinski, Jenkins & Beard, 2012, p. 82).

Peters (2009) developed the DATA reflective practice framework consisting of four recursive phases namely Describe, Analyze, Theorize and Act (Smith, Barlow, Peters & Skolits, 2015). These phases involve describing the situation/event non-judgementally, analysing what's working and what's not working so well, theorizing on potential changes and acting on implementing changes after diligent critical analysis. Action is a critical component of a reflective framework as reflection without action is worthless.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle contends that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (p. 38). Effective learning happens when an individual works through all four stages of this cycle beginning at any stage from concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Thus the act of reflecting is only one stage in this cycle and, as argued against Ghaye's (2011) model, demands understanding and time to reap the benefits.

Time: a key ingredient

Reflection requires stopping and taking time to assess and review, it requires the skill of awareness which helps us pause between stimulus and response, 'a way of being, living, listening' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 88), it requires mindfulness to sharpen one's saw (Covey, 1992). Time is the key ingredient to facilitate reflective practice (Kuit, Reay & Freeman, 2001). However, Edwards (2003) argues there are many other barriers to the universal acceptance of reflective practice within higher education apart from time including such issues involving 'management, pedagogy, curriculum, human development, quality and culture that have to be considered' (p. 244). Covey (1992) eloquently describes why one may resist taking time to reflect:

Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree

"What are you doing?" you ask.

"Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree."

"You look exhausted!" you exclaim. "How long have you been at it?"

"Over five hours," he returns, "and I'm beat! This is hard work."

"Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?" you inquire. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster."

"I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically, "I'm too busy sawing."

(p. 287)

This paper is a call to action to take time to pause for a moment and attend to where we are at as professionals. Goldsmith (2011) opines 'you have to understand that what got you here won't get you there' (p. 6) and taking time out regularly to sharpen the saw (Covey, 1992) cannot be ignored.

PARA: A 'call to action' model

Much has been researched and written about reflective practice, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991), integrating into the practice of educating, however reading such material does not make it a reality for educators. Ben-Shahar (2016, para. 5) writes 'the inconvenient truth is that, while it is often interesting and scientifically sound,

simply learning new information leads to no meaningful change in behaviour in the vast majority of people’.

My personal experience of reflective practice has been transformational as it has revealed insights which I could choose to explore or not, given the on-going demands of working and studying. For example, my first exposure to feedback through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk & Hammer, 1998) personality instrument was a transformational moment, highlighting many areas of strengths and development needs which I may otherwise not have been aware of. Attending to and listening to my strengths gave a great boost to my self-esteem, while listening to my development needs presented new areas for exploration and action. My self-awareness was heightened and continues to be cultivated through reflective practice.

In this paper, the PARA model distinguishes between thinking and doing. To act on the insights from reflection, one must adopt and adapt the new learning, beginning by doing one thing differently, one step at a time and become unstoppable. The call to action acknowledges the need for meaningful change, by recommending a framework with practical steps to allow readers explore reflective practice beginning with pausing and finishing with adopting or adapting changes. Another inspiration for the proposed PARA model, are the words of a song ‘take your PARACHUTE and jump, you can’t stay here forever’ (Aristcourt, 2010): (P)ause, (A)ttend, (R)evise, (A)dopt/(A)dapt.

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Getting started with reflective practice, in my experience, requires pausing, stopping and observing before deciding what to attend to. It is this act of pausing, taking stop-moments, which creates a new awareness, allowing me see events through a different perspective. The four steps, with additional lenses and questions to facilitate exploration of PARA, are outlined:

PAUSE: The critical first step involves stopping (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), observing, being proactive in listening to the changes which are happening in one’s discipline, in higher education and beyond. For example, a PESTLE framework, used by marketing professionals, offers lenses through which changes can be viewed in a variety of domains which may affect one’s teaching practice (Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin, Regnér, 2014). Reflecting outwardly on (P)olitical, (E)conomic, (S)ocio-Cultural, (T)echnological, (L)egal and

(E)nvironmental changes has the potential to capture insights to inform and enrich professional practices. Focusing inward and on others (Goleman, 2013) after pausing, encourages mindfulness and brings an awareness of the effectiveness of one's teaching. Kolb (1984) advises that to reflect effectively on an experience, one should actively set aside part of the working day to reflect and analyse, taking control of the timing and content of what you do (Oncken & Wass, 1974, p. 80).

ATTEND: The second step is to use the time which pausing allows to attend to a particular insight. For example, thinking critically about the effectiveness of one's professional practice, in terms of a particular component of PESTLE or the potential impact of a new technology or a global/national initiative. The following are three pivotal questions (Schoemaker & Krupp, 2015) to consider when working through this step:

- (1) What is working well in my professional practice?
- (2) What is not working so well?
- (3) What is missing from my professional practice, the presence of which would make a difference to both educator and learner?

For example, Stead (2011) encourages us to pause to reflect on a significant lever of change that is mobile technology, by attending to the proliferation of technology in our lives and how this can influence the role of a professional in higher education. Pausing and attending to changes in society can help professionals to 'be agile and keep improving' (Stead, 2011, 6:03).

REVISE: The third step involves reflecting on these answers, allowing consideration of opportunities for enhancement or transformation of professional practice. Puente's (2013) SAMR model provides a useful categorisation of types of changes, suggesting that beginning with enhancements gives practitioners time to become comfortable with integrating changes before progressing to transformational changes. For some professionals, change can be a daunting prospect, thus gradual progression along the curve of change (Handy, 2015) can be most effective.

ADOPT/ADAPT: The fourth step involves consideration of how and when the revisions, identified by working through the earlier steps, can be integrated into professional

practice. This step presents an opportunity to collaborate (Ibarra & Hansen, 2011) and share perspectives and insights with peers and colleagues, solicit feedback, while listening attentively and finally adopting and adapting accordingly. Covey's (1992) Time Management Matrix is a useful tool for prioritising the changes identified. The focus should be on important and urgent initiatives (Covey, 1992) that will impact positively on the professional learning environment for both educator and learner.

Self-discipline and intentionality are critical factors for integrating reflective practice into daily work (Smith et al., 2015, p. 147). The PARA model is an opportunity to demonstrate intentionality while applying a structured approach to transform individual practice. After implementing some changes, iterations of the PARA cycle can then become a pivotal component of professional practice.

PARA in practice

As a student of the MA in Higher Education in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), I am experiencing the benefits of timeout exploring the education landscape with a different set of eyes, being curious and keeping an open mind while daring to stray beyond familiar boundaries (Selwyn, 2012, p. vii). Taking time to *pause* and *attend* to technology-enhanced learning (TEL) informed by an online Technology-Enhanced Learning Teaching and Assessment (TELTA) module run by (DIT), has opened my process of inquiry into the field of educational technology in this golden age, *adopting* and testing *revisions* within my practice. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education has recently stated building digital capacity is 'about developing new ways of dealing with information, working and learning in a digital environment, using time and information differently, and developing new versatility when it comes to interaction in learning environments' (2015, p. vii). Taking a critical and conscious stance (Jones & Hafner, 1998 as cited in Selwyn, 2013b), recognising that educational technology is a field requiring expanded global consciousness (Selwyn, 2013a), enables a modest and incremental introduction of technology into my practice (Puentedura, 2013). Proactivity is critical to facilitate growth within a career-long process (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014) of a professional educator. Proactive people 'work on things they can do something about. The nature of their energy is positive, enlarging and magnifying' (Covey, 1992, p. 83). My journey continues with purposeful action to make practical step changes in my awareness and engagement with digital learning. As a novice of TEL, this caused me to question my digital capacity, as both

student and a facilitator of learning, and to take action to integrate these new insights into my toolkit over time. For example, the Coggle mindmapping tool is facilitating this process, while my dependence on Powerpoint has diminished with Prezi, Powtoon, Animoto, Wordpress, Soundcloud, to name but a few, creating new possibilities. Critically reflecting on my practice through this TEL lens is personally and professionally enriching, illustrating the power of pausing - the starting point of the PARA model - can be transformative. Deceptively small changes can create seismic shifts (Heffernan, 2016).

The strength of this model lies in the simplicity of the steps which are typically engaged when dealing with change, beginning with pausing or stopping and finishing with adopting a different way of behaving or a different way of doing something. The model enables the practitioner to do one thing differently and experience the power of personal transformation over time. Consistent commitment to purposeful practice is a key component to realising transformation. The limitations are driven by the intensity and busyness of individual lives which challenges one's capacity to stop and take 'pause moments'. Time is a key ingredient. A conscious commitment to engage with reflective practice, by controlling the timing and content of what we do, can address this limitation.

Conclusion

Reflective practice is one process that facilitates continuous learning, leading educators and learners into a world of possibilities (Bruner, 2014), by realising the transformational potential of this one step change. The PARA model is an opportunity to open new possibilities within professional practice, enriching contributions as facilitators of learning and cultivating continuous professional development. Reflective practice is a 21st century imperative to mindfully and effectively negotiate the emerging landscapes through pausing, attending, revising, adopting and adapting new insights.

The key limitation of this paper is the desk-based research, informed by personal experience, which could be enriched by conducting primary research exploring learner and educator understanding and experiences of reflective practice. I am keen to undertake such primary research in the future.

Notes on contributors

Trish Ganly is a leadership development practitioner, educator and coach, bringing a wealth of real-world experiences balanced with academic understanding into the areas of leadership, strategy and change management. Trish has a keen interest in reflective practice – exploring barriers and enablers, engaging reflective practice to cultivate a growth mindset and realising its personal transformational potential. As an advocate of lifelong learning, Trish is currently a part-time student of Dublin Institute of Technology studying MA in Higher Education (2015-2017).

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